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Complaint of the Dam Tender's Wife

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COMPLAINT OF THE DAM TENDER'S WIFE

Around 1850, Jules Thurlotte, who was noted for his tremendous strength, built a log cabin here and brought in a young bride . . . It was said that he abused his strength by such feats as draining the brine from a barrel of pork and carrying it two miles, that he gradually went blind, and his young wife finally eloped . . . leaving her blind spouse to shift for himself here in the deep woods.

—Henry Red Eagle

Cruising Maine's Wilderness Waterways

The boom chains clang against the gates
these nights. Each day the freshet rises.
Soon I'll take your hand and lead you
down the footpath to the dam
where you will ratchet free
the swelling waters.

As winter thaws your eyes cloud over.
You pace, restless as wind, forearms
flailing air. Your trapline goes untended.
You gather me up like stovewood,
drowning my shudders, arms
tightly coiled around my ribs,
eyes harsh in deep-boned hollows.

I recall too well the day
you pressed your foul, trap-smashed thumb
to the block, yelling, swing woman!
How, as I seared the bleeding stump, you winced,
then calmly asked about you supper,
saying you were famished and must eat.

Two hungry years with you
and now another spring roars through
the spillways, and soon the cleated
loggers come with tales that fill
our solitude awhile.

If I ran out downriver,
traveling light, you'd hunt my warmth
each night among your bed folds,
wounded and wailing till sunrise.